

Sophia Word
CLAY CO.
Interviewed by Pearl House

The following story of slave days is the exact words of one who had the bitter experience of slavery. Sophia Word, who is now ninety-nine years of age, born February 2, 1837. She tells me she was in bondage for nineteen years and nine months. I shall repeat just as she told the story:

I was here in the time of the Mexican War and saw them get up volunteers to go. They were dressed in brown and the band played 'Our Hunting Shirts are Fringed with Doe and Away We march to Mexico'.

My grandmother came straight from Africa and was auctioned off and bought by William Reid's father. When he died William Reid inherited my mother. Mother married a Bates and had ten of us children.

Our master didn't auction off his slaves as the other masters would, for he was a better master than most of them. When he started to sell one of us he would go out and talk to the old slave trader like he was going to sell a cow or something, and then he would come back to get the slave he wanted. This was the way my mother's brother and sister were sold. When the other masters at other places sold a slave they put the slave on the auction block and the slave trader had a long whip that he hit them with to see if they could jump around and were strong. The largest brought the money.

I was a slave nineteen years and nine months but somehow or another I didn't belong to a real mean set of people. The white folks said I was the meanest nigger that ever was. One day my mistress, Lydia, called for me to come in the house, but no, I wouldn't go. She walked out and said she is going to make me go. So she dragged me into the house. Then I grabbed that white woman, when she turned her back, and shook her until she begged for mercy. When the master came in, I was given a terrible beating with a whip but I didn't care, because I gave the mistress a good'un too.

We lived off to the back of the master's house in a little log cabin that had one window in the side. We lived tolerably well and didn't starve because we had enough to eat, but we didn't have

as good as the master and mistress had. We would slip in the house after the master and mistress were sleeping and cook to suit ourselves and cook what we wanted.

The mistress had an old parrot and one day I was in the kitchen making cookies. I decided I wanted some of them, so I took me out some and put them on a chair, and when I did this the mistress entered the door. I picked up a cushion and threw it over the pile of cookies on the chair. Mistress came near the chair and the old parrot cries out, 'Mistress burn, Mistress burn', then the mistress looked under the cushion and she had me whipped. But the next day I killed the parrot, and she often wondered who or what killed the bird.

I've seen whole pigs roasted before an open fireplace and when it was done we would put a nice red apple in its mouth and the big white folks' company that came would eat this delicious dish. Sometimes we had to bake pies for a week to supply the company that was invited to our master's and mistress's house. They served elaborate dinners and hundreds of guests were invited.

My master wasn't as mean as most masters. Hugh White was so mean to his slaves, that I know of two gals that killed themselves. One nigger gal, Sudie, was found across the bed with a pen knife in her hand. He whipped another nigger gal most to death for forgetting to put onions in the stew. The next day she went down to the river and for nine days they searched for her and her body finally washed upon the shore. The master could never live in that house again as when he would go to sleep he would see the nigger standing over his bed. Then he moved to Richmond and there he stayed until a little later when he hung himself.

Our clothes were made from cotton and linsey. Cotton was used in the summer and linsey for the winter. Sometimes our clothes were yellow checked and most of the time red. Our stockings were made of coarse yarn for winter to wear with coarse shoes. We had high topped shoes for Sunday.

I've seen ten thousand of the Union Soldiers and a great many of the rebel soldiers. The Rebel soldiers would take everything they could get their hands on, but I never did know of the Union Soldier taking anything. The rebels have stolen my master's cows and horses and we would have to hide the meat in a box and bury it in the ground.

[Editor's Note: the Hugh White she mentions is General Hugh White, one of the most prominent citizens of Clay County, an important salt miner, and patriarch of one of the most powerful families in Clay County history. His son John became the Speaker of the House in the 1840s. I haven't been able to find any records of him hanging himself, but that doesn't mean he didn't.]